



# Association for Children's Mental Health

March 22, 2012

Malisa Pearson  
*Executive Director*

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## Honorable Committee Members:

Thank you for allowing me an opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Malisa Pearson and I am the Executive Director of the Association for Children's Mental Health – Michigan's statewide family run organization supporting families raising children with emotional, behavioral, and mental health disorders.

I am also the parent of a young man with Autism AND Bipolar Disorder. My son was diagnosed with Autism at 15 months. When we got the diagnosis, I was devastated. All I could think was my son was never going to have the opportunities other children have – that he might never talk, make friends, have a girlfriend, go to prom, get married. For the next few years, we battled the insurance companies who did not want to cover the therapies and interventions necessary to address his many needs as a child with Autism. We spent our days engaged in all the latest and greatest exercises and activities designed to help him develop skills to navigate his world. And we spent our nights researching how and where we could go to access services for him. And then it happened. What happens to as many as 70% of children with Autism. My son was diagnosed with a co-occurring mental health disorder.

At 5 years old, my son experienced his first major mental health crisis and was psychiatrically hospitalized. During that 10 day stay, we learned that not only was our son struggling with the limitations caused by his Autism, but he also experienced hallucinations, extreme bouts of aggression, and an inability to sleep due to the horrific nightmares his Bipolar Disorder caused. Over the course of the next 5 years, he would go on to experience more than a dozen psychiatric hospitalizations. So when I hear the parents of children with Autism plead with you for coverage of their children, I know the angst they feel because I have been there. I know the Autism journey ~ the fight to get your child whatever they need to give them the best chance to have a normal life and to equip them with the skills they need to live in our world. But I also know the journey of families whose children have serious mental health disorders.

Over 250,000 children in Michigan live with a serious mental health disorder each and every day. As few as 25% of them will receive adequate mental health treatment. This is in part due to a lack of Mental Health Parity in Michigan. Youth suicide occurs at a rate equal to more than one MD-88 jet airliner crashing and killing everyone on board every 2 weeks in this country! That is more than 150 children dying at their own hand every two weeks! Many of those children are our children living with serious mental health disorders who just cannot see a way to go on any longer. And how could they? We

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continue to tell them they are not as worthy as others by denying them treatments that are proven to be effective and by limiting their access to the very services that can save their lives.

Just last week, I had a parent tell me that I did not know what it was like to have a child with Autism. I assure you I do. They went on to tell me I did not know what it was like to drive over an hour each way for their child to access appropriate programming. I assure you I do. Then they told me that I did not know the pain they went through not being able to help their child. I assure you I do. But while I know the pain of not being able to get your child with Autism the services they need, I also know the pain caused by the lack of access to mental health services. The pain of sitting in the middle of a psychiatric assessment room with my son in my lap rocking back and forth while he begs me to kill him because his mental pain is so bad he doesn't feel he can go on.

I beg you to tell me why he is less deserving than a child with Autism. I beg you to tell me how any of our children who have mental health disorders are any less deserving than children with Autism. The discrimination and the divisiveness amongst families must end. Our stories are not so different and we all want the same thing.

I support the Autism families in their efforts to achieve coverage for their children. As a parent, we do whatever it takes to make sure our children get what they need to lead healthy and happy lives. That is what all of us are fighting for.

As a parent, and as the Executive Director of the Association for Children's Mental Health, I support the need to provide coverage for children with Autism and commend you for taking up these bills. My questions is what about the children like mine who have a need for coverage of their whole self; not just part of them.

By broadening this package of bills to include Mental Health Parity, everyone wins. All children in Michigan with a brain disorder win and in turn everyone in Michigan wins! There is no reason to leave any child behind when there is a mechanism available to prevent it. Each of you holds the key. Now, the question is... are you willing to use it. Are you willing to do the right thing and finally end the discrimination? Are you willing to do what it takes to afford ALL Michigan children access to fair and equitable coverage?

For all of our children, I hope the answer to those questions is YES.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Malisa Pearson".

Malisa Pearson  
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